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Aaron Montgomery Ward

Inez Schneider Whitney

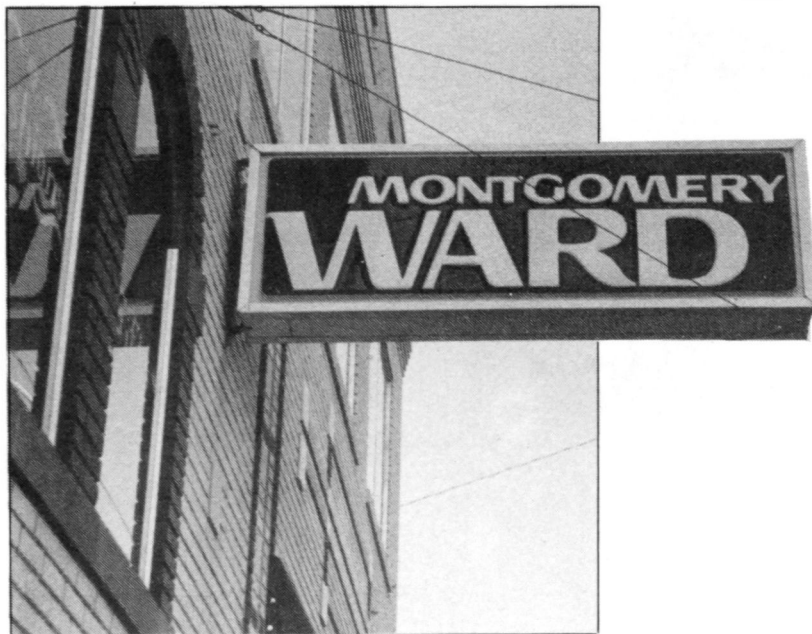
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Aaron Montgomery Ward

— by Inez Schneider Whitney

The company of Montgomery Ward played an important part in the life of the community when I was a child. Everyone affectionately called it "Monkey Ward."

When Aaron Montgomery Ward started his mail-order business in 1872, he had no idea he would be a prototype of a Horatio Alger hero rising "from rags to riches." He began in a livery-stable loft with a capital of \$2,400. A single sheet which constituted his first catalog listed a few dry goods items. At the time of his death, forty-one years later, sales had risen to forty million a year. He originated the mail-order method of merchandising and was the first to put it into practice.

The arrival of the catalog was an important event. Mama and Papa would study it carefully and decide

what they could afford. A large order was made up every spring and fall. It would arrive by freight at the small Oklahoma town of Custer three miles from our farm. When Papa received his notice of the arrival of his order, he would hitch up the horses to the wagon and off he'd go. He would come back with groceries, dry goods, clothing, and sometimes even farm machinery.

When a new catalog came, Mama would say, "Inez, here is the old catalog. Take out any pages you want." I couldn't wait to cut out all the people. Pasted on cardboard they made wonderful paper doll families. I could entertain myself for hours, and if friends came what fun we had! The rest of the catalog was relegated to a small building not far from the rear door of our house. There it served a

very useful purpose.

Then there were the sales catalogs. I remember an order Mama sent after one arrived. It was 1915, and I was looking forward to my ninth birthday. Mama was thumbing through the catalog. All at once she stopped and said to Papa, "Look here. This would make a nice birthday gift for Inez. It's a real bargain too, and she needs dresses for school anyway."

"Request the proper size but no choice of style or color," the catalog stated. The price? Three dresses for a dollar. How happy I was to have that many new dresses all at once and ready made too. I especially treasure the school picture taken that year because I was wearing one. This was only one instance of the happiness Aaron Montgomery Ward brought to countless homes.